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How the unsaid shapes decision-making in boards

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The background is a complex, abstract composition. It features a dark, textured surface, possibly a book cover or a piece of aged paper, overlaid with numerous irregular, torn pieces of lighter-colored paper. These torn pieces are scattered across the frame, some overlapping each other. The edges of the torn paper are jagged and uneven. In the lower right quadrant, the text 'Chapter 1' and 'Introduction' is printed in a clean, white, sans-serif font. The overall aesthetic is one of decay, history, and perhaps a sense of discovery or uncovering hidden information.

Chapter 1

Introduction

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The importance of exploring the unsaid and decision-making in boards

The corporate governance field only has a limited understanding of boardroom processes and why board members silence their opinions even though they are judicially responsible for board performance. Accordingly, this dissertation investigates how decision-making in the boardroom, through the dynamics between socio-cognitive process and communicative events, unfolds over time. This dissertation uncovers the black box of the boardroom and contributes to the current corporate governance debate.

1.1.1 The black box of the boardroom

Recent corporate governance scandals have drawn significant attention to what happens in the boardroom and raised many questions regarding why boards of directors that are responsible for monitoring the firms were unable to prevent the scandals. The frequently raised questions include, Why do boards fail so often? How come boards of directors that are responsible for monitoring and safeguarding their firms were unable to prevent such scandals? How did they resolve interaction difficulties and conflicts? Did they use the full potential of all board members and exchange all information available to them? Did they critically question each other's opinions? What barriers do individual board members experience while monitoring and servicing their firm?

Fama & Jensen (1983: 311) have described the board as the “apex of the firm’s decision control system”. Consistent with this description, scholars generally describe boards of directors as the formal link between a firm’s shareholders and the managers entrusted with its day-to-day functioning (Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Mintzberg, 1993).

These boards face complex, multifaceted tasks that involve strategic-issue processing and are responsible for monitoring and influencing strategy. Because boards are not involved in implementation, what boards produce is entirely cognitive in nature (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). Moreover, since boards of directors are often monitored by external stakeholders and must comply with many rules, these boards are also shaped by the institutions that govern them.

Given boards of directors' institutional importance and that most of these boards' social reality is defined by established rules and conventions that govern their collective thoughts, intentions, and behaviors (Diehl & McFarland, 2010), it is not surprising that there is extensive corporate governance literature on boards of directors. This rich corporate governance literature offers diverse perspectives. Of those, the agency and stewardship perspectives have received the most attention (Berle & Means, 1932; Boivie, Bednar, Aguilera, & Andrus, 2016; Dalton, Hitt, Certo, & Dalton, 2007; Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009; Jensen, M., & Meckling, 1976; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). The recent trend is to focus more on boards' social and cognitive micro-foundations through the behavioral perspective (Bainbridge, 2010; Donaldson, 1997; Fama & Jensen, 1983; Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Gabrielsson & Huse, 2016; Garg & Eisenhardt, 2017; Veltrop, Hermes, Postma, & Haan, 2015; Westphal & Bednar, 2005; Westphal & Zajac, 2013). This trend presents an important deepening of the understanding of board decision-making and enables a deeper exploration of how cognitive and social mechanisms affect decision-making processes.

Nonetheless, the behavioral perspective faces two important issues. First, although behavioral theories of boards explore actual board behaviors, these studies are dominated by survey-based designs. These designs are not suitable for capturing moment-to-moment

interactions and dynamics between individuals. Instead, these studies mostly examine participants' post hoc assessments (i.e., after the social interactions have taken place) and, therefore, risk measuring individuals' biased positive or negative attitudes, opinions and observations toward their fellow board members' actual behaviors (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Frone, Adams, Rice, & Instone-Noonan, 1986). Moreover, these designs do not explore the differences between individual board members' espoused assumptions or theories and their often taken for granted 'theories-in-use' (Argyris, 1992). Corporate governance literature is, therefore, criticized for oversimplifying the problems and underestimating the conflicting demands and pressures that board members face (Carroll, Ingley, & Inkson, 2017). Consequently, corporate governance literature risks presenting 'idealistic or heroic' solutions that are difficult to implement in practice. Second, exploring these 'in-the-moment' actual behaviors and cognition elicits many design challenges and raises several ontological and epistemological questions concerning whether social entities should be perceived as objective, subjective or intersubjective (Cunliffe, 2004).

Significantly, a particularly puzzling tension that boards encounter, described by Forbes and Milliken (1999) in their seminal article, has not received much attention. It concerns how boards manage the tension between two classic criteria of board effectiveness: maintaining high levels of cognitive conflict through task diversity while simultaneously achieving high levels of cohesiveness. Board effectiveness increases when boards can enhance their control role by utilizing "critical and investigative interaction processes" (Amason, 1996: 104). Because the issues that boards face are complex and ambiguous, board members from different backgrounds and expertise are responsible for perceiving issues differently and hold different views about the appropriate response to these issues (Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Forbes & Milliken, 1999). However, although the

presence of cognitive conflict increases the aggregate level of resources at the board's disposal and the quality of decision-making, it is also associated with higher levels of relationship conflict, which diminishes the required cohesiveness and quality of decision-making (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Mooney, Holahan, & Amason, 2007; Nederveen Pieterse, van Knippenberg, & van Ginkel, 2011; Parayitam & Dooley, 2009; Simons & Peterson, 2000). The tension can magnify because boards are large and diverse groups that only meet episodically. As topics during meetings should be discussed in a limited amount of time, these meetings offer a restricted amount of time to address and resolve the attitudinal and linguistic differences that divide them because of diversity and cognitive conflict. As a result, board cohesiveness suffers (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Forbes & Milliken, 2008). Kerwin, Doherty and Harman (2011) explored how relationship conflict affects board effectiveness and found that increased levels of cognitive conflict trigger relationship conflict and that productive board chair leadership is associated with less intense conflict. However, currently, little is known about how boards manage the tension (Boivie et al., 2016; Carroll et al., 2017).

Interestingly, Forbes and Milliken also suggested that “because boards are large, episodic, and interdependent, they are particularly vulnerable to ‘process losses’ (Steiner, 1972) – the interaction difficulties that prevent groups from achieving their full potential” (1999: 492). More recently, some authors have asserted that board members individually experience many dilemmas and suggest that these dilemmas are not discussed and reconciled collectively through sensemaking and decision-making in the boardroom (Carroll et al., 2017). Veltrop, Hermes, Postma and Haan suggest that subgroups instead of individuals struggle: “factional demographic faultlines negatively affect board performance through the perception of board members that the board is split into

subgroups” (2015: 156). Regarding these interaction difficulties, several authors suggest that board members often respond poorly to concerns raised in the boardroom (Westphal and Khanna, 2003; Hambrick, Misangyi and Park, 2005; Westphal and Zajac, 2013; Zhu, 2013). Hambrick, Misangyi and Park for example state “to sometimes ask for additional information, which then requires yet more time and effort might raise eyebrows; to voice any substantive concerns, an act that fellow directors might see as non- collegial, time consuming, even headache inducing” (2015: 333). These authors suggest that a lot is said but that the effects of what is said could hurt cohesiveness and board performance. However, according to Westphal and Bednar, board members often do not even always voice their concerns and opinions: “The results also provided strong evidence that the failure of directors to express their concerns about corporate strategy is a key mechanism underlying pluralistic ignorance on boards” (2005: 286). These intriguing hints and findings suggest that the unsaid and its effects might be relevant regarding boards but that at the same time there is little concrete knowledge concerning what is not said, why not, when and by whom and its effects on board decision-making. This dissertation fills this gap by exploring how the unsaid shape decision-making in the boardroom.

1.1.2 Research questions

With the objective of contributing to filling the aforementioned research gaps and the knowledge on decision-making processes in the boardroom, this PhD dissertation focuses on answering the following main research question:

How does the unsaid shape decision-making in boards?

This question is addressed through four sub-questions, which guide each chapter of this dissertation:

- 1) How do social-cognition and communicative events reciprocally, silently and preconsciously shape decision-making processes between board members and their stakeholders?
- 2) How do board members' paradigms elicit a spiral of unsaid and shape decision-making?
- 3) How do boards manage the tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict through silence climates?
- 4) How should what happens in boards be studied?

1.1.3 Unsaid and board decision-making: constructs and definitions

In addressing the black box of the boardroom and the methodological challenges of studying boardrooms, the question 'how does the unsaid shape decision-making in boards?' is this dissertation's central concern. Adopting an ontological, epistemological and methodological approach that puts 'the unsaid' at the heart of board decision-making is not straightforward. Corporate governance theorists mostly explore boards deductively and, consequently, automatically adopt a positivistic perspective. Theories derived from these approaches and methods do not automatically explore and describe the dynamics and processes that unfold in the boardroom. Moreover, although academics from other fields study groups and teams with different onto-epistemological perspectives, none of these approaches directly explore the unsaid and how it shapes decision-making. Instead, these approaches focus on verbal communication and explore narratives, discourse, language and speech acts (what is said, why, how and by whom), or focus on what and how individuals think and feel (cognition, meta-cognition, emotion), or on how teams think and act (decision-making, sensemaking and sensegiving) or reflect (team reflexivity and learning).

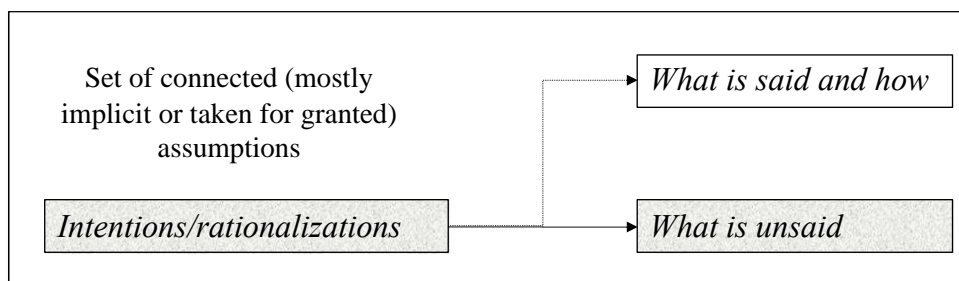
Nonetheless, several perspectives are connected to the unsaid. Many academics who study voice, silence and psychological safety focus on the reasons and the boundary conditions for people, teams and organizations not to voice or silence their thoughts and opinions about the organization. They explore the speaker's perspective and why relevant information is not shared. Other scholars explore the receiver's perspective and focus on non-verbal communication, emotion recognition or how through reading minds (Theory of Mind) individuals assess their situation. Moreover, authors in general regularly assert that people do not always say what they mean or mean what they say, and incongruence, incongruity, noise and a lack of transparency are often deemed essential for decision-making and organizational performance. Interestingly, however, neither of these sets of academics has directly researched and theorized on incongruity, 'noise' and thus the unsaid and its effects. Exploring incongruency and its effects also automatically requires exploring individuals' 'blind spots' and their 'taken for granted' behaviors. According to Argyris (1992), making people aware of their incongruency risks making them defensive. Therefore, exploring the unsaid and incongruencies requires reflexive research (Cunliffe, 2016) and consciously managing the ontological and epistemological challenges that come with it.

When people say what they think and feel in the moment, their communication is congruent and little remains unsaid. However, when what they say does not resonate with what they think or feel, or when what they say is not attuned with what receivers perceive to be congruent, they are or are perceived incongruent. Therefore, putting the unsaid instead of the said front and center, means exploring how incongruities and perceived incongruities (difference between what is said and thought and felt) and their effects shape board decision-making. Through exploring what was said and not said and why (often

unrevealed) taken for granted implicit assumptions (how board members think) surface and allowed for exploring implicit silence theories through probing why individuals had not shared their thoughts and feelings. Implicit silence theories are theories or taken for granted assumptions that drive individuals in deciding whether or not to silence thoughts and feelings in specific instances. These theories are considered a critical sub-set of a paradigm.

Consequently, from this dissertation the construct ‘paradigm’ emerged. A paradigm consists of a set of connected implicit theories which elicit automated, often taken for granted voice and silence behaviors (see Figure 1.1). Voice and silence behaviors thus consist of what individuals say and what remains unsaid but is felt and thought. Implicit or taken for granted assumptions refer to how individuals think in the moment.

Figure 1.1 | An individual’s paradigm and what is said and unsaid



Although the common connotation of the word paradigm, which originated from Kuhn (1962), is normally related to science and is regarded a macro-construct, it is also used to denote micro and meso level characteristics. Borrowing from Hambrick & Fukutomi (1991) – who used paradigm at the micro-level and linked it to management and CEOs – in this dissertation, paradigm is used for the governance field and thus to executive and directors. Since paradigm is used in the context of governance, a paradigm is defined in this dissertation as an individual board member’s finite model of what should be done in

a governance context. A governance paradigm helps a board member assess their situation and decide how to act. Interestingly, since boards mostly consist of members with different expertise (legal, financial, human resources, etc.), they come from different scientific paradigms. Exploring how governance paradigms shape decision-making means investigating how board members with similar and different governance assumptions collectively decide through their voice and silence behaviors, and thus what they say and not say. These governance paradigms are enacted during meetings when board members who have different roles, expertise and backgrounds have to make sense of what is said and respond in-the-moment.

Table 1.1 summarizes the most important constructs that emerged from this research and their meanings to ensure construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010) and readability.

Table 1.1 | Constructs and definitions

Construct	Definition
Agree to disagree climate	Decision-making norms help board members voice hazardous thoughts and feelings without risking relationship conflicts.
Cognitive conflict	Issue-related disagreement among members – it involves “disagreements about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions” (Forbes & Milliken, 1999: 258).
Cohesiveness	The degree of interpersonal attraction that exists among members. It also measures the ability of the board to continue working together.
Compliance climate	Board members assume that it is appropriate to share thoughts and feelings relating to their role and expertise, but that it is hazardous to share thoughts and feelings about subjects concerning someone else’s role and expertise.
Conflict climate	Board members are aware that the board is struggling with a cognitive conflict. They try to resolve issues formally and informally. Members in these boards share implicit silence theories that instruct them to resolve the conflict formally. Hence, members of these boards take more risk in sharing hazardous thoughts and feelings formally.

Construct	Definition
False attribution bias	When a ‘reality’ is misperceived, negative intentions are falsely attributed to others as a way to explain the misperception or disagreement.
Governance	“The formal structures, informal structures, and processes that exist in oversight roles and responsibilities in the corporate context” (Hambrick, Werder & Zajac, 2008: 381).
Governance paradigm	A governance paradigm is a construct that describes an individual board member’s finite model of what should be done in a governance context. These governance paradigms are enacted during meetings when board members who have different roles, expertise and backgrounds have to make sense of what is said and respond in-the-moment. A governance paradigm helps a board member assess their situation and decide how to act on the spot.
Implicit theories	Heuristic information processing skills (Detert & Edmondson, 2011) enable individuals to process ‘in-the-moment’ events (Ross, 1989: 342), make sense (Levy, Chiu, & Hong, 2006) and make countless small (implicit) decisions and judgments (Anderson & Lindsay, 1998; Detert & Edmondson, 2011) about the situation they are in relatively effortlessly.
Implicit silence theories	Theories that drive individuals in deciding whether to silence their thoughts and feelings in specific instances.
Implicit voice theories	Theories or taken for granted assumptions that drive individuals in deciding whether to speak up in specific instances.
Naïve realism	The phenomenon that people have the unshakeable conviction that they are somehow entitled to an objective reality, a reality that others will also perceive faithfully, provided that they are reasonable and rational (Pronin, Gilovich & Ross, 2004: 781).
Organizational (silence) climate	Shared and enduring perceptions that individuals hold of psychologically important aspects of a particular work environment (Ashforth, 1985; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Silence is then or becomes a collective behavior. According to Morrison and Milliken (2000), a climate of silence is characterized by two shared beliefs. First, that speaking up about problems in the organization is not worth the effort, and second, that voicing one’s opinion and concerns is dangerous.
Paradigm	The preexisting knowledge system that a manager/director brings to an administrative situation. It includes preconscious and conscious implicit theories about how to perform in the governance context. These implicit theories explain how a board member behaves in-the-moment, often in an automated, taken for granted way.
Paradigm-attachment	Someone who believes that their paradigm is objective, and is unaware that they perform from a system of connected implicit theories or assumptions that can be biased.

Construct	Definition
Paradigm - consciousness	Someone who considers their paradigm subjective and is thus aware that they perform from a system of connected implicit theories or assumptions that can be biased. They, therefore, explore their assumptions when faced with unexpected events. Exploring one's assumptions is also referred to as 'reflexivity'.
Patterns of implicit silence theories	Shared theories that explain why, how and when boards decide to silence thoughts and feelings.
Preconscious thoughts and feelings	Thoughts and feelings that are taken for granted at a particular moment but can easily become conscious and can be commemorated.
Pseudo-cohesiveness climates	Board members consider sharing thoughts and feelings in formal meetings too hazardous, but as they have different ideas on who is responsible for resolving conflicts, they informally discuss conflicts in subgroups. Members of these boards have cognitive conflicts about how to govern and respond to emerging conflicts.
Shared unsaid	A concept that captures how a subgroup of board members informally evaluate a peer's behavior.
Silence strategy	Describes a board's response to a conflict based on board members shared implicit silence theories that enact different levels of unsaid.
Subjective perspective with critical reflexive elements	This way of studying organizational life explores how people interpret, make sense of, or manage roles, expectations, and impressions in their social interactions (Cunliffe, 2018) while being critically reflexive (Alvesson, 2011; Cunliffe, 2004, 2018) regarding the requirements and complexities involved in researching implicit silence theories.
Two-tier governance system	A corporate structure system that consists of two separate boards of directors that govern a corporation. The structure is composed of two boards, the 'Management Board' with executives, and the 'Supervisory Board' with non-executives. Each of these has different roles.
Unsaid	An individual-level concept describing how individuals unilaterally and thus silently judge each other's performance.
Unsaid known	The conscious, unshared 'knowledge' of what the sender thinks and feels and the speculative knowledge about the receiver.
Voice behaviors	What is said and unsaid (but thought and felt).

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 *Exploring a mystery: an abductive approach*

Since the decision-making process in the boardroom is considered a black box, this dissertation's overall purpose is to build theory through abductive reasoning and inquiry. Abduction refers to "reasoning from phenomena, understood as presumed effects, to their theoretical explanation in terms of underlying causal mechanisms" (Haig, 2018: 372). It is a "creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012: 167).

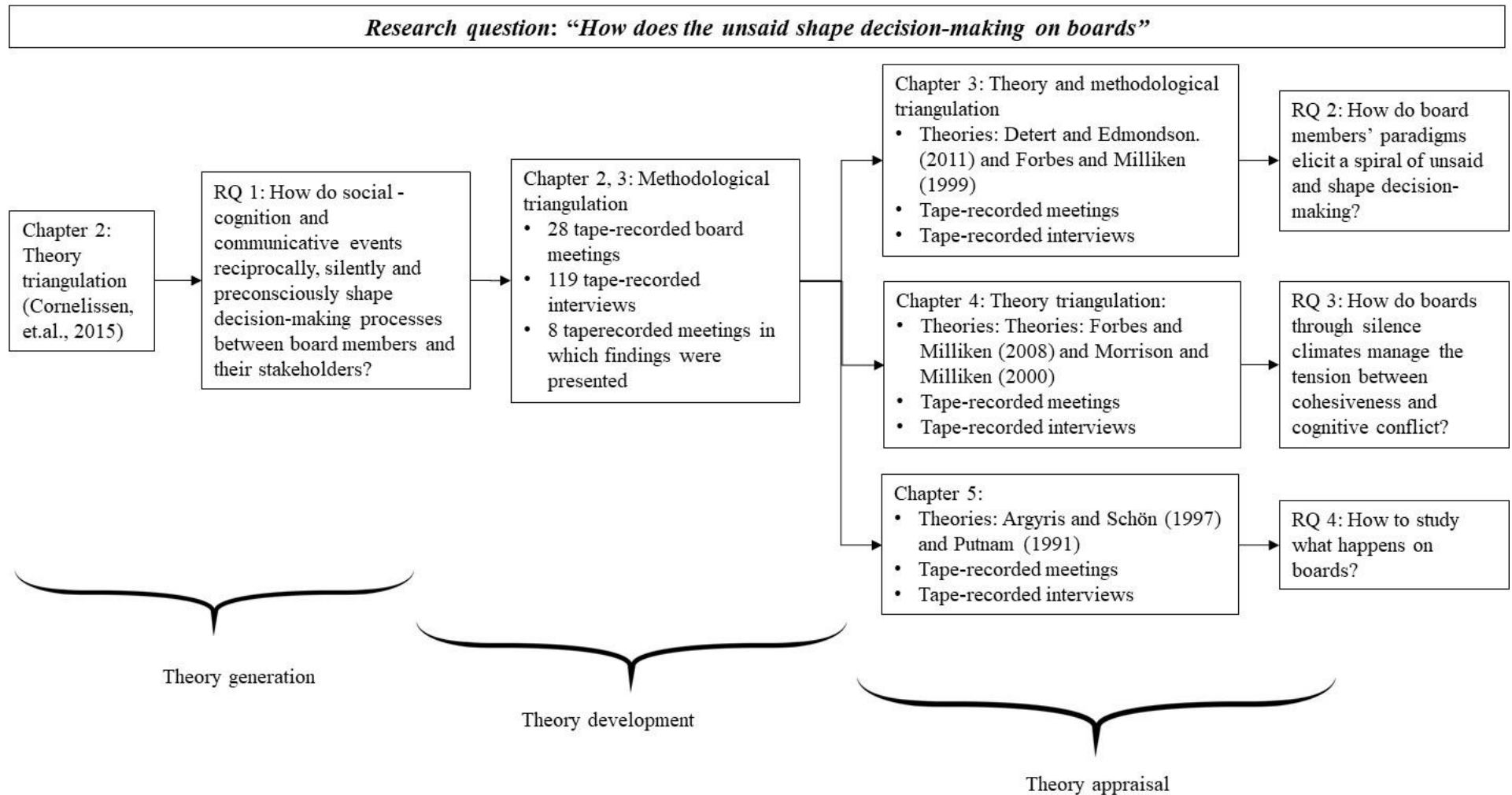
Consistent with an abductive approach, the purpose of connecting unsaid to decision-making is not to justify a theory but to "merely suggest that something may be" (Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008: 907). Although board members are supposed to speak up and voice their opinions and concerns, several small cues suggest that not all is said, and this presumed phenomenon warrants exploration (Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Westphal & Bednar, 2005). Therefore, investigating the unsaid and decision-making in boards involves the discovery of a theory, also referred to as 'a mystery' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) or 'doubt' (Locke et al., 2008). In this respect, the term 'doubt' "designate[s] the starting of any question, no matter how small or great" (Locke et.al., 2008; 908). The goal, however, is not to solve the mystery. Instead, "the mystery becomes more understandable: it is less puzzling and less ambiguous" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007: 1278). Moreover, "establishing a mystery in itself offers an interesting source of further thinking since it encourages problematization and self-reflexivity" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; 1278).

Whereas 'breakdowns', inconsistencies, irregularities and biases are often considered a risk for research, Alvesson & Kärreman suggest that "inconsistencies and

breakdowns derived from empirical observations ... may help us develop theory” (2007: 1266). In this dissertation, breakdowns are vital since exploring the unsaid means exploring the effects of these breakdowns, both those emerging during the decision-making process in the boardroom as well as those during the research process. The question ‘how the unsaid shapes decision-making in the boardroom’ is subject to uncertainty and unclarity, as it is unclear what is the unsaid, how it shapes decision-making and whether it can be empirically explored.

In line with abductive reasoning, this abductive research involves three methodological phases: ‘theory generation’, ‘theory development’, and ‘theory appraisal’ (Haig, 2018). During the theory generation phase, a conceptual model emerged through exploring different theories from different fields, with different paradigms. This conceptual model helped determine how to gather and analyze empirical material and how to minimize the researcher’s role in the process. During the theory development phase, theories emerged while gathering empirical material. During the theory appraisal phase, three sub-questions emerged while simultaneously analyzing theories and empirical material. Theory and methodological triangulation were employed to answer the research question. Theory triangulation means different theories are viewed to explain a phenomenon (Thurmond, 2001). Methodological triangulation “involves a complex process of playing each method off against the other so as to maximize the validity of field efforts” (Denzin, 1978: 304). Triangulation “enhances the accuracy” (Jick, 1979) and development of comprehensive understanding (Patton, 1999) of phenomena through “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin, 1978: 291). Although triangulation is also used to mitigate researchers’ bias (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, Dicenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014; Flick, 1992; Fusch et al., 2018; Patton, 1999; Stavros &

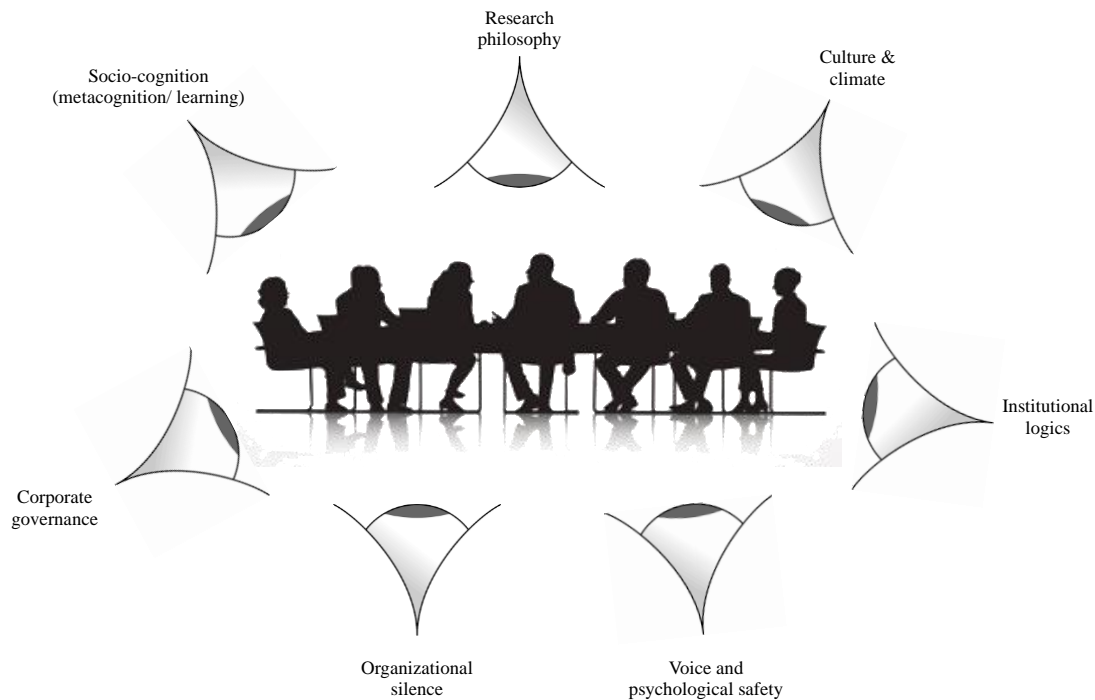
Westberg, 2009) and, therefore, for credibility and validity purposes (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, Dicenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014), in this dissertation, it serves two different purposes. First, triangulation is used to directly explore the ‘breakdowns’ between theories and fields about decision-making. Different theories and fields take on a specific view of decision-making and have different paradigms and, thus, are underlined by different assumptions. Exploring these theories helped construct a holistic view on the unsaid and decision-making. This construction or framework (introduced in Chapter 2) helped further design the empirical research process. Second, triangulation is used to directly explore different perspectives regarding how decision-making unfolds in the boardroom. This approach aims at developing theories that ‘resonate’ instead of aiming at creating validated theories. The unsaid explores how different but silent and unexpressed perspectives shape the deliberation and decision-making processes in the boardroom. Figure 1.2 visualizes how triangulation per phase has helped answer the research question: How does the unsaid shape decision-making in boards?

Figure 1.2 | Triangulation and an overview of the paper

1.2.2 Theory generation phase

Theory triangulation was applied in the theory generation phase. Through exploring theories regarding (meta)-cognition, sensemaking, decision-making and learning and corporate governance, the research question was defined and clarified (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Exploring these theories also allowed the borrowing and blending of theories (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011; Weick, 1995), and enabled the development of construct clarity, validity and definitions (Hirsch & Levin, 1999; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016; Suddaby, 2010). Due to the lack of a direct connection between the unsaid and literature streams, exploration of different management theories in different fields was required to determine how the unsaid shapes decision-making. Some of these theories have overlapping implicit and explicit assumptions, while the underlying assumptions of other theories differ significantly (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3 | Different fields and theories



The institutional logics, organizational silence, socio-cognitive and research philosophical theories are either social constructivist or explicit in their onto-epistemological perspective and appear to be paradigm conscious. Conversely, corporate governance and voice theories are more positivistic in nature and, consistent with their paradigm, these theories are more quantitative rather than descriptive or conceptual. For example, when mixed methods are used to explore a research question, these methods are used without being explicit in their onto-epistemological perspective. Hence, these theories risk ‘ontological drift’ (Thompson, 2011). For example, the ‘implicit voice theory’ perspective (Detert and Edmondson, 2011), which is a dynamic and relational perspective (as implicit theories are described to help individuals assess and respond to emerging situations), is researched from a positivistic/quantitative perspective. Additionally, socio-cognitive theories and communicative theories were explored and led to an emergent framework that distinguishes a speaker’s cognition from the sender’s cognition and explores how miscommunication and misinterpretation can induce a spiral of unsaid known (Chapter 2: A Spiral of Unsaid Known). The conceptual framework was used to critically and reflexively choose a research approach and method as well as to manage design challenges (Chapters 3, 4 and 5).

1.2.3 Theory development and theory appraisal phase

During the theory development and theory appraisal phases, both theory and methodological triangulation were applied. More specifically, four different methods were used. The first method concerned the observation and tape-recording of board meetings that took place between August 2017 and January 2018¹. As some boards had three different board meetings in succession, each with different variations of participants, how the

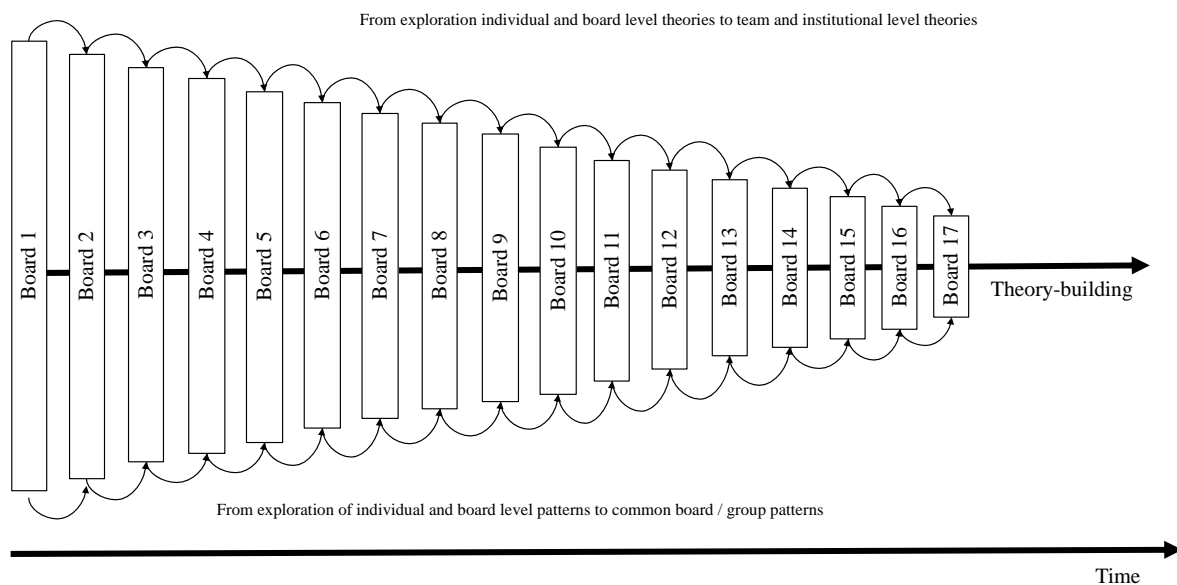
¹ Further details about the study sample are available upon request. Throughout the dissertation the list of boards was rotated to decrease recognizability per board and assure confidentiality.

participation of members effected the communication events were observed. For example, a sequence would involve one meeting with work council members but without the CEO, the next with only non-executives, and the third with both executives and non-executives. During each of these meetings, similar topics were discussed. The second method used was tape-recorded confidential interviews. These interviews, on average, lasted one hour, were conducted with each board member and were planned within two weeks after the meeting. The retrospective accounts of each board member participating in one or more meetings were explored using the “Left-Hand Column’ method”, described by Putnam (Senge, 1997: 246) and developed by Argyris and Schon (1974). By borrowing from theories on mindreading (Nichols & Stich, 2003), this method was complemented by adding a ‘receivers perspective’ that explored what board members believe other board members think but do not say. The third method involved tape-recorded presentations. During these presentations, this dissertation’s findings were presented and discussed, and board members were asked whether the emerging theories resonated. The exploration of theoretical perspectives is the fourth method. Theories regarding decision-making, socio-cognition and corporate governance were explored to define, study, deepen and answer the four sub-research questions.

Through observing and tape-recording board meetings, contextual information, which is essential to inquire into the thinking of each board member effectively, was acquired. Moreover, through tape-recorded data of the meetings, what was actually said could be re-listened to after receiving all the board members’ retrospective accounts. This enabled the exploration of the differences and alignments between what individual board members recollected about their board meeting. Additionally, what was actually said and not said and what board members thought had been said could be analyzed as all board meetings and interviews were tape-recorded. Moreover, the observations and tape-records of the meetings, in combination with the retrospective and tape-recorded accounts of all members

participating in that meeting about what was said and not said, offered unique insights into board communicative event cycles. Only two board members out of 119 appeared not to share all they knew in the interview. Furthermore, presenting and discussing preliminary findings per board and in an event organized by the director's society² that 120 board members participated in, enabled theorizing with board members about the effects of shared implicit theories on actual behavior in the boardroom. Theories emerged and converged as the number of board meetings observed and the number of board members interviewed increased and board-level findings could, therefore, be compared (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4 | Developing theory through methodological triangulation



Finally, linking empirical material to theories on decision-making and corporate governance (theory triangulation), helped appraise emerging theories through formulating sub-questions and developing more specific theories. These sub-questions were then explored and described in this dissertation. These sub-questions are 1) How do board members'

² VTW conferentie, "Het ongezegde in de boardroom", 6th of April 2018, Amersfoort

paradigms elicit a spiral of unsaid and shape decision-making? 2) How boards through silence climates manage the tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict? 3) How to (reflexively) study what happens in boards?

1.2.4 Subjectivity, critical reflexivity and nature of findings

The unsaid is a highly dynamic and intersubjective construct since individuals decide what not to say ‘in-the-moment’ based on what is said and previously not said. Consequently, taking an intersubjective (Cunliffe, 2011) approach at first appeared to be the most logical and consistent approach. This approach “draws on a relational ontology to explore the relational, embodied, and intersubjective nature of human experience” (Cunliffe, 2008: 129). It assumes knowledge “is an embodied and intersubjective knowing, that may be understood through radically reflexive practice” (Cunliffe, 2008: 129). However, a subjective approach was instead chosen for two reasons. First, this dissertation explores a mystery and does not justify a causal relationship, and second, because of the richness and thickness of the empirical material gathered during the theory development phase, this dissertation allowed for 17 boards and 119 board members’ ways of interpreting and thinking. A subjective study is one “where the researcher is positioned as another interpreting knowing actor rather than objective observer” (Cunliffe, 2011: 663). This way of researching empirical material offers thick interpretations and descriptions. It focuses on constructed meanings and explores how, through turn-taking, individuals create a shared interpretation of their reality (Cunliffe, 2011). This dissertation also applied critically reflexive elements (Cunliffe, 2011) because of the highly intersubjective, social constructive nature of the unsaid and its epistemological meaning and consequences. Cunliffe defines critically reflexive as “examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions, [and] the impact of those actions” (Cunliffe, 2016: 407).

As a consultant, before this dissertation, the researcher had been reflecting taken for granted assumptions since 1998. Through the ‘Left-Hand Column method’ (Argyris and Schon, 1974) introduced to the researcher by Robert Putnam (Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985; Putnam, 1991) the researcher had become increasingly aware of her defensive routines (Argyris, 1992, 2003, 2011). Additionally, the researcher had become more reflexive through regular reflection on action techniques with colleagues when she was faced with undesired outcomes as well as through teaching her clients ‘reflection on action skills’ since 2000. The researcher had, therefore, been consciously acquiring reflective practitioner skills (Argyris & Schön, 1997; Argyris, 1992; Putnam, 1991), which are also currently referred to as critically reflexive practitioner skills (Cunliffe, 2016).

During this dissertation, the researcher debiased herself as much as possible and limited the level of unsaid in interviews in two ways. First, through explicitly testing assumptions with respondents during interviews and meetings, especially when the researcher perceived inconsistencies, tensions and dilemmas. Second, the researcher made notes of moments when she felt that she had not expressed these inconsistencies during the interviews and thus knew that the unsaid emerged between board members and herself. With her notes, the researcher tried to reflect with peers on the effect of what had remained unsaid in the interviews and meetings on theorizing and this dissertation’s findings. Nonetheless, despite her training and attempts to ‘debias’ (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012) herself and limit the level of unsaid, the researcher is deeply conscious of the biased nature of humans. This dissertation has made the researcher even more aware of how subjective people reason and behave. Therefore, the researcher emphasizes the exploratory purpose of this study and the subjective nature of the findings.

1.3 Dissertation's output

This dissertation consists of six chapters, four of which are research papers. Table 1.2 presents an overview of the research output of this dissertation. For each chapter, the table contains the research questions, the key theories that the chapter contributes to and the type of paper.

Table 1.2 | An overview of chapters and key theories

Chapter	Title	Research question	Theory	Type of paper
1	Introduction			
2	Spiral of unsaid known	How do social-cognition and communicative events reciprocally, silently and preconsciously shape decision-making processes between board members and their stakeholders?	Institutional logics and socio-cognitive theories	Conceptual
3	How paradigm-attachment enacts a spiral of unsaid in the boardroom	How do board members' paradigms elicit a spiral of unsaid and shape decision-making?	Corporate governance theories and voice theories	Empirical
4	Silence climate in the boardroom	How do boards, through silence climates, manage the tension between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict?	Corporate governance theories, organizational silence and climate theories	Empirical
5	How to study what happens in the boardroom: A critical study on methodology	How to study what happens in boards?	Organizational learning, research philosophical and methodological theories	Essay
6	Discussion			

1.3.1 Contribution and chapters

Following this first introductory chapter, the second chapter answers the following question: *How do social-cognition and communicative events reciprocally, silently and preconsciously shape decision-making processes between board members and their stakeholders?* A review of the extant studies on a wide variety of theories was conducted to answer this question. An emerging theory was developed that explains how preconscious, taken for granted and automatic, socio-cognitive processes and communicative events between board members and their stakeholders shape boards' decision-making. As it conceptualizes how micro-processes between board members shape macro-processes, an institutional perspective is warranted. Although each board member is both a sender and receiver of messages, this study explicitly distinguishes between the sender and receivers' cognition. Overall, this paper establishes how what is 'unsaid' but 'known' elicits a spiral of 'unsaid known' and ineffective decision-making when senders communicate and/or receivers perceive incongruent messages. When board members collectively become aware of these incongruent communications and the related underground dynamics, they can improve their decision-making and decisions. Finally, this chapter addresses how future institutional theories can build on the proposed model and advance the theoretical depth and empirical investigation of social-psychological processes in boards.

The third chapter answers the question: *How paradigm-attachment enacts a spiral of unsaid in the boardroom?* This question was answered by collecting real-time tape-recorded data from 37 meetings of 17 boards and conducting retrospective interviews with 119 board members. The motives behind what board members say and do not say during board meetings were explored. Additionally, individual and group level paradigm similarities and differences, taken for granted implicit voice theories and actual communicative interactions, were analyzed. The data shows that board members who consider their governance paradigm

objective and are considered paradigm-attached enact a spiral of unsaid when they try to manage silent conflicts through informal decision-making. When a hot situation is enacted due to the spiral of unsaid, it is managed through scapegoating and ostracizing the board members with the least dominant minority paradigm.

The fourth chapter answers the question: *How do boards, through silence climates, manage the tension between cognitive conflict and cohesiveness?* An organizational silence perspective was used to analyze the same data set as in the third chapter to answer this question. This paper describes how four silence climates shape four different levels of cohesiveness and cognitive conflict towards board effectiveness. A board silence climate is characterized by how a board – through different silence strategies – maintains a dynamic equilibrium between cohesiveness and cognitive conflict. The data revealed that since a cognitive conflict always risks eliciting a relationship conflict, boards constantly adjust through voice and silence when encountering conflicts. Four different board climates are distinguished, each with different silence strategies that shape four different levels of board effectiveness and show how silence strategies shift in response to tension reconciliation.

The fifth chapter answers the question: *How to study what happens in boards?* This chapter reflects on why researching the unsaid is key when exploring taken for granted assumptions, voice behaviors and decision-making in boards. It also explores what researching the unsaid in boards requires. Since, the unsaid is considered the nexus between cognition and communication, exploring it reveals what is not said but is nonetheless communicated or perceived non-verbally. Borrowing from Argyris, and Schon's (1974) 'Left-Hand Column method' as well as from theories on mindreading (Nichols & Stich, 2003), 119 board members from 17 boards retrospectively reflected on what they had not said during one specific meeting (senders cognition) and what they thought others had not said and why not (receivers cognition). Exploring these recollections and comparing them to the

tape-records of the observed meeting revealed interesting findings regarding the unfolding of the decision-making in the boardroom. However, this approach elicited many ontological and epistemological challenges. Reflecting on this research approach revealed that being aware of different levels of consciousness is required for researching taken for granted assumptions. Moreover, it also highlighted that perspective-taking is key when conducting such intersubjective research while the researcher's judgments suppress the unsaid. Perspective-taking makes board members feel appreciated and moreover helps researchers to debias themselves when faced with unexpected events. Only through perspective-taking can a spiral of unsaid between a researcher and their respondents be limited and, therefore, also limit biased theorizing.

This dissertation concludes with a discussion chapter in which the key findings are discussed in light of their implications for future research.

Table 1.3 provides an overview of the presentations conducted at academic conferences, while Table 1.4 details when the findings were presented to board members and other practitioners.

1.3.2 Overview of presentations and discussions

Table 1.3 | Overview of presentations and discussion at academic conferences

Research Question	Conference/ Topic	Date
Chapter 2: Spiral of unsaid known		
8th Developing Leadership Capacity Conference	Presentation of paper	July 2016
Academy of Management Review	Under review	May/20
Chapter 3: How Governance Paradigm Attachment enacts a spiral of unsaid and decision-making in the boardroom		
Academy of management Chicago	Seminar: Uncovering effects of unthought, unsaid, unseen, and (un)remembered	Aug. 2018
	PDW Navigating qualitative papers with Ann Cunliffe	Aug. 2018
	PDW MOC Cognition in the rough with Chet Miller, Subrahmaniam Tangirala and Jennifer Gephart	Aug. 2018
	PDW OMT, with Ann Langlely	Aug. 2018
	PDW process studies with Kevin Corley	Aug. 2018
EGOS	Accepted paper but did not present	Aug. 2018
11th International Process research Greece	Presentation of paper	June 2019
ESMT 11th Coaching Colloquium	Presentation researching the unsaid	Dec. 2019
AoM 2020	Silence Climate paper accepted. Presentation due in august	Aug. 2020
	Paradigm attachment paper accepted and presentation due in August	Aug. 2020
Academy of Management Journal	Under review	May/20
Chapter 4: Silence Climate in the boardroom		
Administrative Science Quarterly	Under review	Apr/20
Chapter 5: How to study the unfolding of decision-making through the unsaid in the boardroom		
Strategic Organization	Revice and Resubmit	May/20

Table 1.4 | Overview of key presentations and discussion at practitioners' conferences

2018 - 2019 Het ongezegde in de boardroom/ Unsaid in het boardroom			
Name	Type	Date	participants
VTW congres	Seminar	April 2018	120
Autoriteit Woningcorporaties	Seminar	July 2019	25
AFM	Seminar	Nov. 2019	20
Cultuur en Ondernemen	Yearly congres	Oct. 2018	100
VTW jaarcongres	Yearly congres	Sept. 2018	100
Vrije Universiteit	Curratorium MBA's	April 2019	12
ESAA Erasmus Governance Institute	Congres alumni	April 2019	75
CRM link	Seminar alumni	June 2019	20
Nederlandse Vereniging voor Commissarissen en Directeuren	Seminar	June 2019	30
Vrije Universiteit	Curratorium Controllers	July 2019	12
Ernst & Young	Congres for housing corporations	Sept. 2019	75
Vrije Universiteit	Center for Coaching	Oct. 2019	20
2019 - 2020 Kracht en Tegenkracht/ Power and Countervailing power			
Vrijplaats Woningcorporaties	Seminar	Nov. 2019	20
Autoriteit Woningcorporaties - VU	Kracht en Tegenkracht	Feb. 2020	270
Total number of 'investigators'			290

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